

*weed - noun \ 'wēd\ - an obnoxious
growth, thing, or person*



DIGITAL WEEDS

HOW GOOGLE CONTINUES TO ALLOW BAD ACTORS
TO FLOURISH ON YOUTUBE

LET'S FACE IT, WE ALWAYS FIGURED WE'D BE RIGHT BACK HERE.

In June 2013, Digital Citizens published a troubling report that demonstrated how bad actors – drug dealers, content thieves, passport peddlers and others exploited the Internet for financial gain. And how Google stood to benefit by collecting ad revenue from the videos these bad actors posted on YouTube.

That report, entitled “Google & YouTube and Evil Doers: Too Close for Comfort,” made a difference: within days Google scrubbed YouTube of hundreds, if not thousands of videos promoting the illegal sale of drugs, fake passports and counterfeits. Google also deleted videos tied to searches for “find underage prostitute” and other escort services.

Many of these videos had been on YouTube for months, some years, and only were taken down when major media outlets such as USA Today published articles and Google came under scrutiny from state attorneys general.

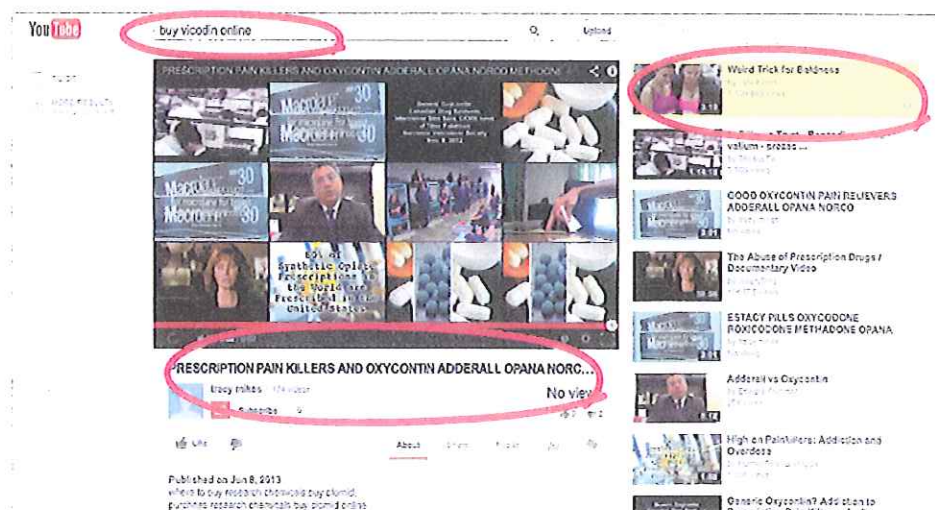
What was most startling was not only did Google allow these videos to remain on YouTube – one of the most popular websites for teens and pre-teens – but also that the company directly profited from these shady videos. How? Google ran ads tied to those videos and split the revenue with these would-be bad actors. If you believe in the adage “the company you keep,” then how could you reconcile Google's willingness to not only profit from videos promoting dangerous and even illegal activities? Google even gives a kick back – a percentage of that revenue to those bad actors. This from the company with the motto, “Don't be evil.”

When Google made its “Don't be evil” pledge, it said: “We believe strongly that in the long term, we will be better served—as shareholders and in all other ways—by a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short term gains.”

Fast forward eight months and unfortunately many of those videos that Google hastily removed in June in light of public condemnation have resurfaced. Once again, Digital Citizens must question whether Google is living up to its “Don't be evil” promise, and more fundamentally, its commitment as an Internet leader.

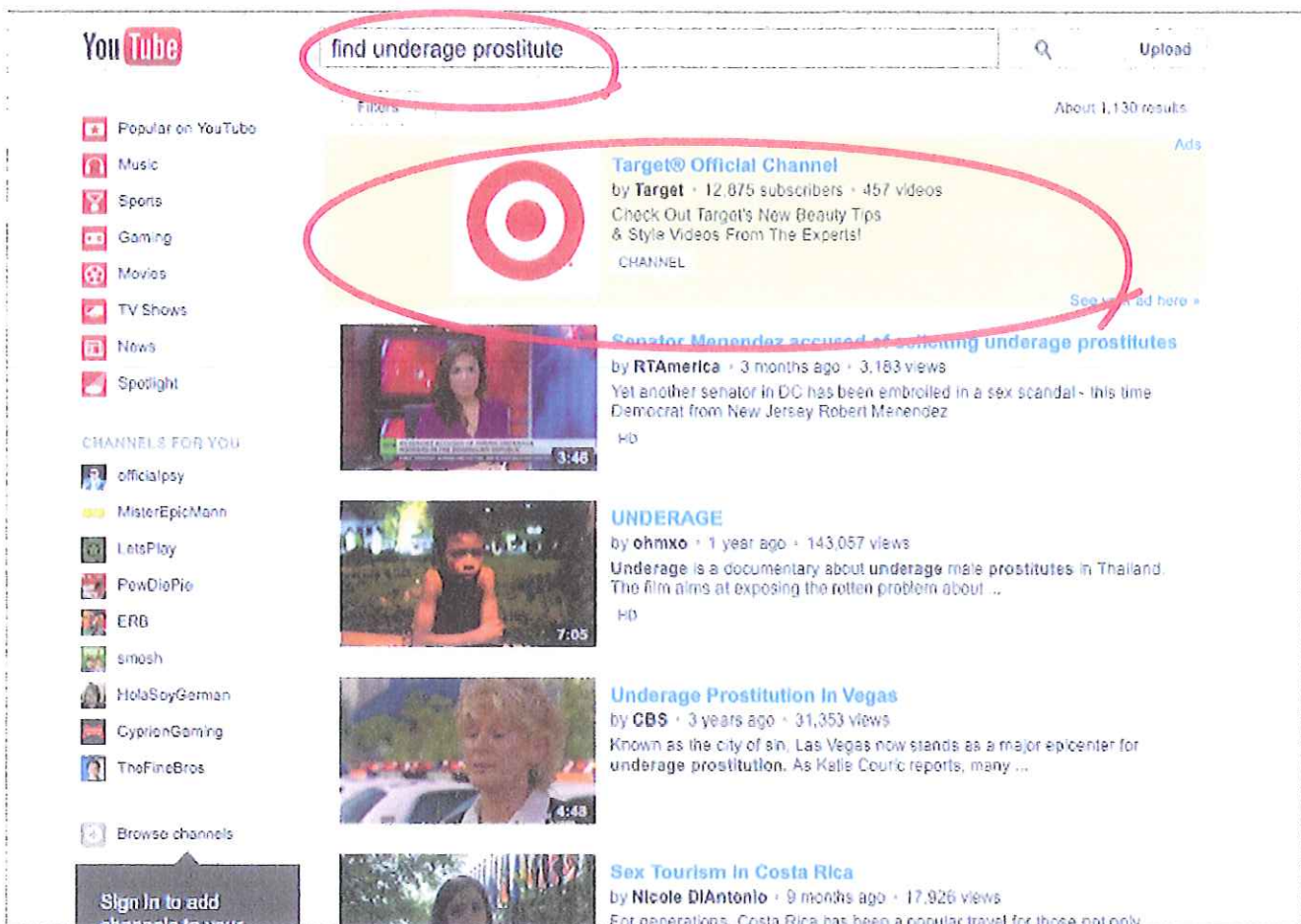
Google's business is built on ads, and YouTube is just one platform that contributes to the \$55 billion juggernaut. According to YouTube, the site receives more than a billion unique visitors each month and more than 6 billion hours of video are watched on a monthly basis.

Google's business may seem complicated, but it's actually pretty basic. Google makes money by selling ads – to a search term, or a video. Think about when you click on a YouTube video. Sometimes you have to watch an ad before it will run, sometimes there is a banner ad that shows up on the bottom during the video, and other times there are ads that run around the video.



Here are examples from our June 2013 report. In the first example, you see the ad in yellow to the right for a video promoting how to purchase prescription painkillers.

In the second example, we see how Google makes money by simply running an ad connected to a search term, in this case a Target ad when the term "find underage prostitute" is searched.



After negative publicity, Google removed those videos and contended its system to police YouTube of objectionable content is working. That policy: "YouTube's review teams respond to videos flagged for our attention around the clock, removing any content that violates our policies...We also have stringent advertising guidelines, and work to prevent ads appearing against any video, channel or page once we determine that the content is not appropriate for our advertising partners."

No, Google's system is not working. In fact, it's failing badly.

Citing the illegal sale of pharmaceutical, content theft and sex trafficking; state law enforcement officials have demanded that Google do better. Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood in December said Google seems "unwilling to take basic actions to make the Internet safe from unlawful and predatory conduct, and it has refused to modify its own behavior that facilitates and profits from unlawful conduct."

Google continues to treat this as a PR problem, not an issue of Internet safety. When faced with criticism, it removes controversial videos while boasting of how many it takes down a year. But Google has thus far refused to make the kind of systemic changes to YouTube and the YouTube Partner Program that would address the problem for good.

Ultimately, that means that like weeds, videos are pulled, simply to return. This report focuses on how a new batch of "digital weeds" – objectionable videos on everything from drugs to counterfeits to ID theft to fakes – have resurfaced on YouTube. No doubt, that shortly after the publication of this report Google will once again pull these weeds. And it's just as certain that once the attention slips away, these objectionable videos will resurface. There must be a better way.

PRESCRIPTION NARCOTICS & STEROIDS

Prescription drugs have been a staple of YouTube ever since Google in 2011 reached a \$500 million settlement with the Department of Justice to settle charges that it knowingly allowed ads for fraudulent foreign and Canadian pharmacies in the United States. As part of the agreement, Google admitted its knowledge of the ads and even helping advertisers circumvent systems designed to prevent illegal ads from ever appearing. Additionally, the DOJ required Google to implement strict new policies and procedures to prevent foreign and illegal pharmacies from ever appearing on AdWords again.

Like drug dealers on a corner the police busted, the "pharmacies" simply migrated from Google to YouTube that has no such policies and procedures. After the Digital Citizens June 2013 report and Google's superficial scrubbing of YouTube, the drug dealers on YouTube went underground for a bit, but now they never really left.

Here's how many results appear on YouTube:

- "Buy drugs without a prescription": 17,000 results
- "Buy Percocet without a prescription": 725 results
- "Buy tramadol without a prescription": 1,310 results
- "Buy Oxycontin without a prescription": 2,000 results

For example, here's a YouTube video promoting the sale of Oxycontin and Roxicodone without a prescription. Note the 2014 Winter Olympics ad on the right:

The screenshot shows a YouTube interface. At the top, the search bar contains the text "Buy percocet without a prescription". The main video player displays a video titled "Looking to Buy Oxycontin and Roxicodone without Prescription" by the channel "lawson fills", which has 22 views. The video thumbnail shows a pile of pills. Below the video player, there are links for "About", "Share", "Add it", and "Like". The right sidebar features a "Get up to 40GB storage at no extra cost!" advertisement for "ShareFile". Below the ad, there is a list of recommended videos, including "2014 Winter Olympics" (1:50:02), "Pete Townsend walks out of Howard Stern Interview" (1:00:02), "Intervention S03-E012 Shane - Alcohol, Oxycontin and prescription drugs 02/03" (1:00:02), "Snorting prescription pain pills is new high for teens" (4:54), and "Buy Oxycodone, Hydrocodone, Methadone Online" (3:44).

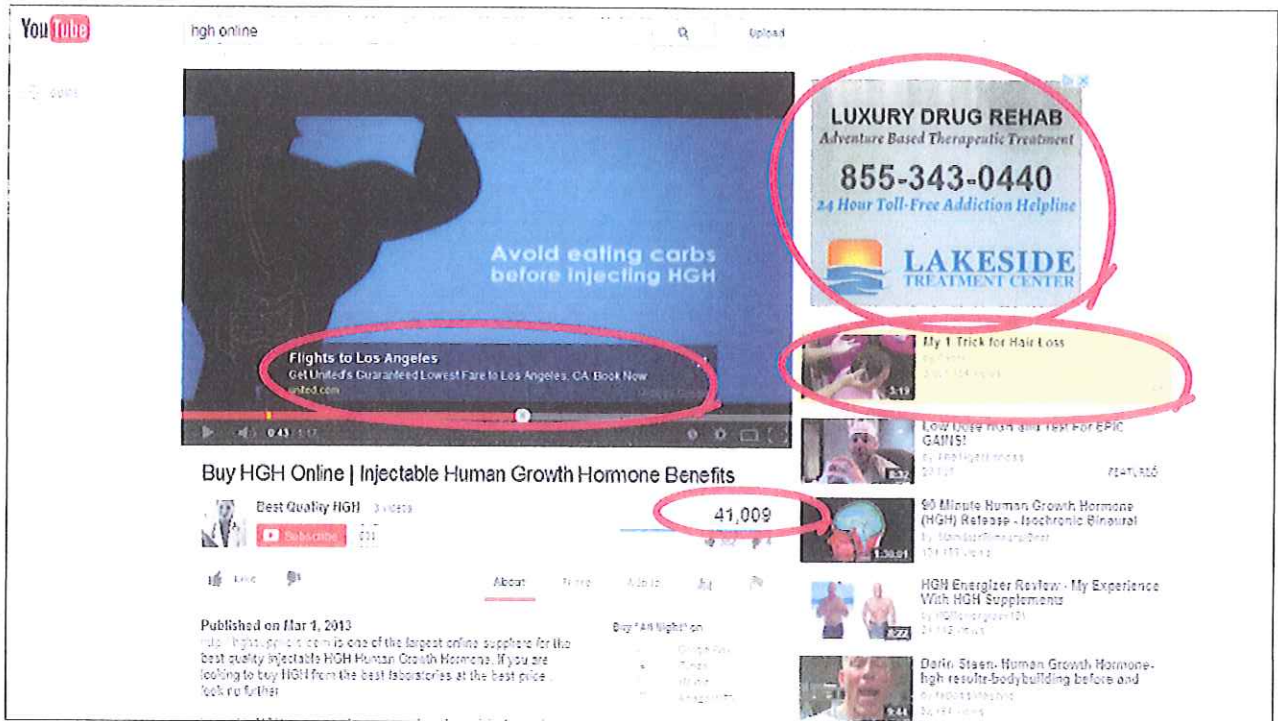
In another video, seen below, three ads are connected to this drug video that offers narcotic painkillers and steroids “without a prescription:”

It's common for ads for major brands to accompany videos promoting the illegal online sale of controlled substance. In this case, an ad for the Discover Card is flanked next to a video offering the stimulant Adderall and other drugs.

[In October 2013, Digital Citizens followed the June report with a look at how easy it was to acquire appearance and performance enhancing drugs \(APEDs\)](#) after searching through videos for steroids and Human Growth Hormone on YouTube.

Steroids remain popular on YouTube. Note the ShareFile ad to the right.

This HGH video, on YouTube since March 2013, has over 41,000 views. It has an ad embedded promoting flights to Los Angeles, one for hair loss and another for drug rehabilitation. Google analytics enable it to connect ads that are relevant to the video, but apparently those same analytics won't flag illegal activity.



Steroid use, especially among teens trying to get an athletic edge or enhance their looks, is reaching epidemic proportions. It's no accident that steroid dealers target YouTube given its popularity among its target audience: teens and pre-teens.

It's an alarming YouTube combination: supply (drug dealers) and demand (teens).

FINANCIAL FRAUD/ID THEFT

Financial fraud and ID theft are a scourge and growing threat to Internet commerce. One in 10 Americans have been victimized by credit card fraud, according to Consumer Sentinel Network and the U.S. Department of Justice. Nearly half of financial fraud is related to credit cards, costing more than \$5 billion a year.

That is why it's so disheartening when ads from premium brands – in the case below a Honda ad – not only give credibility to criminals selling stolen credit card numbers, but enrich them too.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player with the search bar containing "Buy Stolen cc numbers". The video being played is an advertisement for Honda, featuring a close-up of a stolen credit card. The card is a "Debit MasterCard" with the number "5189 1999 9999" and an expiration date of "05/10". The cardholder's name is partially visible as "NAME HERE". The Honda logo is in the bottom left corner of the video frame. Below the video, the title reads "buy / sell credit card number cvv2 , dump track1&2 verified seller". The channel name is "Boss Seller" with 7 videos and 1,244 subscribers. The video was published on Oct 8, 2013. The description includes contact information: "mail: good business@hotmail.ca", "www.track2on.com", and "BEST CVV / DUMP SHOP 90% APPROVAL INSTANT REFUND ON DECLINED STUFF. FREE REGISTRATION. UPDATE EACH WEEK. Also sell Paypal and bank Logins". To the right of the video player, there is a sidebar with recommended videos. The first video is "Go hug someone that matters to you." by Honda. The second video is "Search Engine Hacking: Finding Credit Cards, Social Security Numbers, and..." by Stephen Gossett. The third video is "Woman flayed by Orca!" by E! Online. The fourth video is "Credit card number and cvv2" by V1G0R2. The fifth video is "Credit Card Skimmers More Advanced, Harder to Detect" by SYMPHONYNET. The sixth video is "How To Hack a website using Manual sql injection [Step by Step tutorial]" by Hacking. The seventh video is "BUY CVV2, Buy Cvv, Buy TRACK2, buy".

It's also remarkable to realize that Google is essentially business partners with stolen credit card sellers with Honda duped into helping these criminals as well (the company may have no idea its ad is providing criminals additional revenue..

But it goes beyond stolen credit cards. Google makes money off "how-to" videos on such activities as "how to hack an ATM without a card."

The hacking video below features at least three ads, including an ad for Disney's "Frozen" on Blu-Ray.

The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "How to hack an ATM machine (working 100%)". The video player shows a hand inserting a card into an ATM. The video is from the channel "APKMflesh.com" and has 24,967 views. The video is published on Nov 25, 2013. There are three red annotations: a circle around the video title, a circle around the video player, and a circle around the video description.

how to hack an atm without a card

Try Align. Recommended by gastroenterologists and consumers! BUY NOW Walgreens

Disney Frozen on Blu-ray

Code tricks ATMs into dispensing bigger bills Video abc7chicago.com

HOW TO ROB A BANK FROM HOME

Hidden Messages In New \$100 Dollar Bill?

Audi is a victim in this next video, with an ad connected to generating a fake credit card number. This video has been up since November and has over 3,000 views.

The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "Generate Working Fake Credit Card Number". The video player shows a screenshot of a website. The video is from the channel "Harsh Agrawal" and has 3,009 views. The video is published on Nov 25, 2013. There are three red annotations: a circle around the video title, a circle around the video player, and a circle around the video description.

Generate Working Fake Credit Card Number

Harsh Agrawal

3,009

Published on Nov 25, 2013

0.87% Annual Percentage Rate ally BANK

Audi Big Game Commercial

WpEngine Hosting Review - Pros and Cons by a Customer

Exclusive Report on How Facebook is Making Money

JustRetweet Review - Get More Genuine Retweets

FAKE PASSPORTS AND CURRENCY

Perhaps the most alarming finding from the Digital Citizens June 2013 report was videos promoting the sale of fake passports and other forms of identification. These "services" ranged from bogus U.S. passports to fake drivers licenses and utility bills – all the documents needed to establish an illegal residency.

In the video below, a ShareFile and MagnetStreet ads are embedded in a video promoting the sale of fake drivers' licenses, ID cards, fake money and other documents.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player with the title "Fake passport for sale". The video content displays a fake passport. Two red circles highlight specific elements: one around the title and another around a ShareFile advertisement that says "Get up to 40GB storage at no extra cost!". Below the video player, there is a MagnetStreet advertisement for "Leader in Trend Forward Designs & Personalized Service". The video description reads: "fake passports, ID cards, DL fake money and other documents f...". The video is by "mactive brenda" and has 57 views. It was published on Feb 4, 2014. The description also includes a link to a website and a note about the cost of the documents.

In the video below for "fake bills," an ad for the annual Consumer Electronics Show is featured to the right. This video has been on YouTube since September 2013.

The screenshot shows a YouTube video player with the title "Fake bills for sale". The video content displays a printing lab with the text "OUR PRINTING LAB". A red circle highlights a CES Coverage 2014 advertisement on the right side of the video player. The video description reads: "Euro and Dollars printing, fake currency, Printing Fake Bills. We s...". The video is by "Muhammed Ahmad" and has 1,191 views. It was published on Sep 20, 2013. The description also includes a link to a website and a note about the cost of the documents.

Fakes go well beyond IDs, of course. In this video promoting knock-off Michael Kors handbags is an ad for the University of North Carolina's Business School. It's unfathomable that UNC would want their brand connected to counterfeits.

The screenshot shows a YouTube search result for "Buy a fake hand bag". The video player displays a woman in a purple jacket. The video title is "2014 cheap Michael Kors Bag replica LV handbag high quality o...". The channel is "Boss Pany" with 86 views. The video was published on Jan 27, 2014. The description includes "cheap air jordan 33.0 cheap nike air max 90 cheap nike air max". The video player has a red circle around the video title and a red circle around the video player controls.

CONTENT THEFT

In this video promoting "how to upload full movies on YouTube without copyright" is an ad promoting Sony's movie "The Monuments Men."

The screenshot shows a YouTube search result for "how to upload full movies on youtube without copyright". The video player displays a scene from "The Monuments Men". The video title is "How To Upload Full Movies Or Episodes On Youtube". The channel is "azmTutorials" with 2,933 views. The video was published on Sep 19, 2012. The description includes "Buy 'Church (Clean Version)'". The video player has a red circle around the video title and a red circle around the video player controls.

DÉJÀ VU, ALL OVER AGAIN

Eight months ago, the Digital Citizens Alliance called on Google to take a greater responsibility to make the Internet safer. A safer Internet is vital to keeping it free and open. At the time, Google responded by removing hundreds, if not thousands of videos promoting objectionable content and cancelling the YouTube Partner accounts for many of these bad actors. Now that content is back and Google appears to be letting many of the same criminals back into its YouTube partner program – ensuring both YouTube and the criminals can continue to profit from these videos.

Digital Citizens fully expects that with the release of this report Google will once again superficially scrub YouTube. But until it makes a systemic change, we'll continue to play Whac-A-Mole: with drug dealers, identity thieves, and other bad actors disappearing when scrutiny is high and reappearing as soon as the media and law enforcement turn their attention elsewhere.

There has to be a better way. We know that a free and open Internet comes at a cost. There will always be content that some may find objectionable. But the current system is screaming for a solution.

First, Google can and must do better at keeping illegal content off of YouTube. With more than 100 hours of new content uploaded to YouTube every minute, the task for Google is formidable but far from impossible. In fact, no company is better positioned than Google to proactively tackle this problem using its vast collections of data and unparalleled analytics capabilities.

When YouTube came under scrutiny last summer, it unilaterally scrubbed hundreds if not thousands of videos that were questionable. In that case, it didn't wait for a report from users. There is nothing stopping Google from doing the same thing on a monthly, weekly or daily basis – other than having the will to do so.

Additionally, Google further proved its capabilities here by successfully keeping YouTube virtually free of child pornography despite the same challenges inherent to YouTube's massive size.

Google seems to have drawn a line that says that porn and vulgarity are objectionable and won't be facilitated, but illegal narcotics and prescription drugs are fair game. Google should adopt the same standards on these potentially dangerous activities that it does for pornography and vulgarity.

Second, and most importantly, Google needs to bar criminals and those promoting illegal goods and services from the YouTube Partner Program and kick those already in the program out immediately. While Google openly worries that overly aggressive policing of YouTube content could harm "free speech," no such excuses exist for the addressing the company's advertising partnerships with criminals and other bad actors. Kicking criminals out of the YouTube partner program may harm Google's profits, but certainly not free speech.

Google and YouTube should not benefit financially from videos that promote potentially illegal or unscrupulous actions. By allowing ads and sharing in their revenue, Google and YouTube are encouraging the creation of videos related to drug dealing, prostitution, ID forgery, content theft, and counterfeiting.

Waiting for users to complain and acting reactively is not a solution to this part of the problem. Google apparently agrees and states that it does review all applicants to the YouTube partner program to ensure they own the copyright to all the videos they upload and adhere to all applicable laws. Unfortunately, however, the massive number of YouTube partners dealing in illegal goods and service already identified by Digital Citizens suggests Google is not living up to this promise.

Additionally, Internet users deserve a more clear understanding of what Google is willing to allow. If Google is going to continue to potentially profit from ads on objectionable videos on YouTube, it should clearly state the criteria.

The simple reality is that Google seems to have no incentive to deal with these problems on its own.

Google is maniacally focused on increasing advertising revenue from YouTube and creating new procedures and requirements that would potentially slow that growth are not in Google's interests.

There is a lot at stake when it comes to Internet crime. The safety of consumers who get dangerous or illegal goods online, the loss of jobs and economic opportunity caused by criminal actions, the degradation of leading brands, and, the faith that the Internet can be trusted and is a safe place to work, live, play and learn.

Hopefully, Google will step up and be the leader it should be.

